

Age, Fear of Crime and Victimization  
in Rural Areas

Joseph F. Donnermeyer  
Assistant Professor  
National Rural Crime Prevention Center  
The Ohio State University  
Columbus, Ohio

G. Howard Phillips  
Director and Professor  
National Rural Crime Prevention Center  
The Ohio State University  
Columbus, Ohio

Mary Jo Steiner  
Research Associate  
National Rural Crime Prevention Center  
The Ohio State University  
Columbus, Ohio

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## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the extent and nature of property crime victimization to older rural persons. Much has been written about criminal victimization among the urban elderly (Clemente and Kleiman, 1976; Goldsmith, 1976), however, very little has been written about crimes occurring to rural older Americans.

Available research indicates that, generally speaking, the urban elderly are less likely to be victimized by burglary, household larceny, rape, assault, and homicide, but more likely to be the victims of purse-snatch and other forms of personal larceny, con and fraud, and street robbery (Goldsmith, 1976; U.S. Department of Justice, 1979). Perhaps, however, the most serious consequences of crime to older persons is its psychological and sociological impacts. In urban environments, for example, fear of crime contributes to the restriction of activities, such as going outside the dwelling unit for visiting and shopping (Clemente and Kleiman, 1976; Sundeen and Mathieu, 1976).

This paper will address several research questions with respect to the extent of property crime victimization among the rural elderly. The narrowing of focus to include only property crime victimization is based on the simple fact that previous rural crime research has found that nearly 95 percent of crimes occurring to rural residents are against property (Phillips and Wurschmidt, forthcoming).

The paper will first examine the proportion of the elderly victimized by three major types of property crime, and will compare the extent of victimization between the younger and older respondents from the study. Second, the paper will review characteristics of rural elderly victims. Third, the paper will compare attitudes toward crime between the older and

younger respondents. Fourth, the paper will examine characteristics of rural older persons associated with the perceived seriousness of crime and feelings of personal safety. Finally, the paper will look at the impact of victimization to the rural elderly with respect to their perceived seriousness of crime and feelings of personal safety.

#### Research Methods

Information for this paper is based on a rural victimization study conducted in Pike County, Indiana (pop. 12,300). Pike County was selected as the research site for two reasons. First, it is primarily a rural county, with a mixed economic base of agriculture and coal mining. Petersburg, the county seat, had a population at the time of the study of nearly 2,800 persons. Petersburg is located approximately 42 miles north of Evansville, Indiana. Second, one of the sub-goals of the study was to examine the comparative rate of victimization between younger and older age groupings. According to HEW (1974:41) estimates, the proportion of the population 60 years of age and over in Pike County was 21.8 percent in 1976. This is considerably higher than the state average of the population 60 and over, which was estimated for 1976 at 14.3 percent.

A simple random sample of households from the county telephone directory was utilized. Each residential listing in the telephone book was enumerated and a sample of 400 telephone numbers was randomly selected. Only one listing per the same address was counted, unless the address indicated an apartment dwelling.

The survey instrument was administered by telephone. A total of 366 interviews were completed with one adult member (20 years or older) of the household. Of those households contacted, a total of 66 refused to be interviewed. The completion rate was 84.7 percent for those

households which were contacted. In addition, 62 households originally selected for inclusion in the study could not be contacted for a variety of reasons. Most had phones disconnected because they had moved out of the county.

The victimization section of the survey instrument was modeled after the National Crime Study (National Research Council, 1976) in order to insure comparability of the Pike County crime data with national crime rate statistics. The victimization questions were divided into two parts: a series of items on household level crimes (burglary, household larceny, motor vehicle theft, and vandalism), and crimes against the person (personal larceny, assault and robbery). Unlike the National Crime Study, the Pike County victimization study included the crime of vandalism because previous research by Phillips (1975) and Smith (1979) have indicated it to be one of the most frequently experienced by rural residents. The crime of rape was omitted from the Pike County study due to the sensitivity of the subject, and the mode by which the data was collected.

The household victimization questions could be answered by any adult member of the household. However, questions pertaining to crimes against the person were directed specifically to the respondent, who then was asked if such crimes had occurred to other members of the household. This is dissimilar to the National Crime Study method which addresses the personal victimization items occurring to each household member (over 12) during person-to-person interview sessions. The telephone format employed in the Pike County Study restricted administration of the total survey instrument, including the personal crime items, to only one adult member of the household (over 20).

Similar to the National Crime Study (National Research Council, 1976),

a specific time period (12 months) was used, and all crime statistics refer to annual rates. The time period for the Pike County study was the 1978 calendar year. The telephone interviews were conducted during the first several months of 1979. In order to verify positive responses to the crime questions, a series of follow-up items were utilized. These included detail on the day and month during which the criminal incident occurred, and additional information on the nature of the incident, such as the type of property stolen or damaged, the location of the incident, and whether or not the incident was reported to a law enforcement agency. If an incident described by the respondent did not occur during the 1978 calendar year, it was not counted in the calculation of the crime rates.

Attitudes toward crime and feelings of personal safety were measured by four attitudinal items. These items and the response categories are reproduced below.

- (1) Within the past year do you think that crime in your neighborhood has increased, decreased, or remained about the same?

Increased . . . . ☐

Don't Know . . . . . ☐

Same . . . . . ☐

Haven't Lived Here  
Long Enough . . . . . ☐

Decreased . . . . ☐

- (2) When do you feel safe in your home (or apartment building)?

Always, both day  
and night? . . . ☐

Night only? . . . . . ☐

Day only? . . . ☐

Never? . . . . . ☐

- (3) How safe do you feel if you happen to be at home alone during the day?

Very safe? . . . . ☐

Somewhat unsafe? . . . . ☐

Reasonably safe? . ☐

Very unsafe? . . . . . ☐

(4) How safe do you feel if you happen to be at home alone at night?

Very safe? . . . . ☐

Somewhat unsafe? . . . . ☐

Reasonably safe? . ☐

Very unsafe? . . . . . ☐

#### Property Crimes Occurring to Rural Older and Younger Persons

Households were dichotomized according to the age of all household members. The household crimes of vandalism, burglary, and household larceny are shown in Table 1 by two categories: (1) households where all members were 60 years or older; and (2) households in which at least one member was less than 60 years old.

As the results in Table 1 indicate, there were not statistically significant differences between older and younger households on the probability of victimization for each of the three offense categories. Older households were slightly more likely to have experienced an incident of vandalism, but less likely to be either burglarized or to have a larceny occur.

Table 1. Proportion of Pike County Households To Which One or More Household Level Property Crimes Occurred, By Age of Household Members

Age of Household Members	Vandalism (Percent)	Burglary All Types (Percent)	Household Larceny (Percent)
Some Members < 60 (N=241)	7.1	7.9	8.3
All Members ≥ 60 (N=117)	9.4	4.3	6.8
	$\chi^2 > .05$ C=NS	$\chi^2 > .05$ C=NS	$\chi^2 > .05$ C=NS

This finding is significant because it suggests that the pattern of victimization in rural areas may be different from urban areas. In urban places, the probability of victimization for these crimes (except vandalism for which statistics are not available) decreases with age. The nature of the impact of crime on the urban elderly has more to do with their greater levels of fear toward the probability of victimization, although vulnerability to certain crimes, such as fraud, and purse-snatching are also problems.

The results in Table 1 indicate that there exists a smaller differential between older and younger persons in rural areas with respect to the direct experience of victimization, than in urban areas. This is not to be interpreted as meaning that older persons in rural areas do not have special problems associated with the impact of crime. Quite to the contrary, the increased physical vulnerability and generally lower incomes of older persons means that the effects of direct victimization may be differentially higher among the rural elderly than among the urban elderly, when compared to younger age groupings in the same respective environments.

#### Location and Household Size of Older Victimized Households

Who among the elderly are more likely to be victimized in Pike County? In order to further examine criminal victimization among older households in Pike county, a breakdown of household-related offenses by household size, location of residence, and age of the household head was completed. Table 2 shows the results of this analysis. It may be seen that the proportion of older households from small towns to whom at least one victimization occurred was 28.6 percent. This is higher than the proportion of older households from either the county seat (16.7 percent) or from the open-country (17.4 percent) who were victimized. However, the difference is

not large enough to be statistically significant. The pattern of victimization to older households found in Table 2 is similar to that of the total sample. Households located in the small towns were more likely to have been victimized than in any other part of Pike County.

Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Household-Related Victimizations to Older Households in Pike County, By Place of Residence, Household Size, and Age of Household Head

(A) Location of Household (All Members 60)	None (Percent)	One or More (Percent)	Total (Percent)
County Seat (N=36)	83.3	16.7	100.0
Small Town (N=28)	71.4	28.6	100.0
Open-Country (N=46)	82.6	17.4	100.0
	$\chi^2 > .05$ C=NS		
(B) Size of Household (All Members 60)	None (Percent)	One or More (Percent)	Total (Percent)
1 (N=59)	77.7	20.3	100.0
2 (N=56)	83.9	16.1	100.0
	$\chi^2 > .05$ C=NS		
(C) Age of Household Head	None (Percent)	One or More (Percent)	Total (Percent)
60-69 years (N=61)	78.7	21.3	100.0
70 years and older (N=55)	85.5	14.5	100.0
	$\chi^2 > .05$ C=NS		



In part B of Table 2 is shown the proportion of older households who have been victimized, by the size of the household. There was a slightly higher likelihood for single member older households to have experienced a victimization than older households with two or more members. However, the difference is not statistically significant.

In Part C of Table 2 is the breakdown of household victimization by age of the household head. Households with the head 60-69 years of age were more likely to be victimized (21.3 percent) than households in which the head was 70 years or older (14.5 percent). However, once again, the chi-square value is not statistically significant.

#### Attitudes Toward Crime Among Rural Residents: Age Group Comparisons

Are there differences in attitudes toward crime between rural older and younger persons? Table 3 summarizes the results of four attitudinal items related to this question. There was very little difference in the proportion of older and younger persons who perceived crime in their neighborhood as increasing during the past year. Slightly over 20 percent of persons less than 60 years old, compared to 19.8 percent of the respondents 60 years and over believed that crime locally was on the increase.

However, there was a difference in feeling safe at the place of residence between older and younger persons. A greater proportion of the respondents less than 60 years of age felt safe all the time (91.2 percent) than those 60 years and older (75.7 percent).

There was also a statistically significant chi-square on the third attitudinal measure in Table 3. A larger proportion of persons under 60 felt "very safe" when home alone during the day (76.3 percent) than those 60 years and over (61.3 percent). However, the proportion who felt "very safe" at night when home alone was nearly identical for both age groups.

Table 3. Attitudes Toward Crime, By Age of Respondent (Pike County, Indiana)

Item	Less Than 60 Years (N=227)	60 Years or Over (N=111)
(A) Has Crime in Neighborhood		
Increased	20.2%	19.8%
Same/Decreased	79.8%	80.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%
$\chi^2 > .05$ , C=N.S.		
(B) When Do You Feel Safe in Your Home		
Always	91.2%	75.7%
Day Only/Never	8.8%	24.3%
Total	100.0%	100.0%
$\chi^2 < .01$ , C=S		
(C) Feeling Safe When Home Alone During Day		
Very Safe	76.2%	61.3%
Reasonably Safe/Unsafe	23.8%	38.7%
Total	100.0%	100.0%
$\chi^2 < .01$ , C=S		
(D) Feeling Safe When Home Alone At Night		
Very Safe	46.7%	46.8%
Reasonably Safe/Unsafe	53.3%	53.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%
$\chi^2 > .05$ , C=N.S.		

These results indicate that the rural elderly display a higher fear of crime than younger persons, despite little difference in the probability of victimization between older and younger households. Goldsmith (1976) and Clemente and Kleiman (1976) likewise suggest that the greatest impact of crime on the elderly may not be crime itself, but the psychological impact of fear as manifested by relatively lower levels of feeling safe and secure within their own dwelling unit.

# Attitudes Toward Crime Among Rural Older Persons

Are there characteristics of the rural elderly which distinguish those who feel relatively safe from those who do not feel as safe? In this section of the paper, attitudes toward crime among older persons in Pike County will be examined according to the factors of household size, location of residence, and age of the older person.

Table 4 presents information on attitudes toward crime by size of household. The general pattern is that the rural elderly who live alone were more likely to perceive crime as increasing and to feel less safe than older persons who did not live alone. However, only one of the chi-square values was statistically significant. This was for item B where 68.4 percent of those who lived alone "always" felt safe, compared to 88.9 percent of those who did not live alone.

Table 4. Attitudes Toward Crime Among Rural Older Persons, By Size of Household (Pike County, Indiana)

Item	Single Member (N=57)	Two or More Members (N=54)
(A) Has Crime in Neighborhood		
Increased	28.1%	20.4%
Same/Decreased	71.9%	79.6%
Total	100.0%	100.0%
$\chi^2 > .05$ , C=N.S.		
(B) When Do You Feel Safe in Your Home		
Always	68.4%	88.9%
Day Only/Never	31.6%	11.1%
Total	100.0%	100.0%
$\chi^2 > .05$ , C=N.S.		
(C) Feeling Safe When Home Alone During Day		
Very Safe	75.4%	59.3%
Reasonably Safe/Unsafe	24.6%	40.7%
Total	100.0%	100.0%
$\chi^2 > .05$ , C=N.S.		

Table 4. Continued

Item	Single Member (N=57)	Two or More Members (N=54)
(D) Feeling Safe When Home Alone At Night		
Very Safe	47.4%	46.2%
Reasonably Safe/Unsafe	52.6%	53.8%
Total	100.0%	100.0%
$\chi^2 > .05$ , C=N.S.		

In Table 5 is a comparison of attitudes toward crime by location of residence. Location of residence was divided into 2 categories: (1) town--those residing in the county seat or any of the smaller towns in Pike County; and (2) open-country--those residing outside of any residentially developed area of Pike County.

The results in Table 5 indicate that older persons living in the open-country areas of Pike County were less likely to feel safe when alone during the day or night than older persons residing in a town. However, neither chi-square value was statistically significant at .05 level of confidence. There were only minimal percentage differences on perception of crime increasing in the neighborhood and feeling safe in one's own home.

Table 5. Attitudes Toward Crime Among Rural Older Persons, By Location of Residence (Pike County, Indiana)

Item	Town (N=64)	Open-Country (N=46)
(A) Has Crime in Neighborhood		
Increased	26.6%	19.6%
Same/Decreased	73.4%	80.4%
Total	100.0%	100.0%
$\chi^2 > .05$ , C=N.S.		

Table 5. Continued

Item	Town (N=64)	Open-Country (N=46)
(B) When Do You Feel Safe in Your Home		
Always	76.5%	76.1%
Day Only/Never	24.5%	24.9%
Total	100.0%	100.0%
$X^2 > .05$ , C=N.S.		
(C) Feeling Safe When Home Alone During Day		
Very Safe	68.8%	56.5%
Reasonably Safe/Unsafe	31.2%	43.5%
Total	100.0%	100.0%
$X^2 > .05$ , C=N.S.		
(D) Feeling Safe When Home Alone At Night		
Very Safe	55.2%	41.3%
Reasonably Safe/Unsafe	44.8%	58.7%
Total	100.0%	100.0%
$X^2 > .05$ , C=N.S.		

The comparison of rural elderly attitudes toward crime by the age of the household head is presented in Table 6. None of the chi-square values were statistically significant. However, persons over 70 were less likely to always feel safe in their home (70.4 percent) than the respondents 60-69 years old (83.6 percent).

Table 6. Attitudes Toward Crime Among Rural Older Persons, By Age of Respondents (Pike County, Indiana)

Item	60-69 Years (N=61)	70 Years and Over (N=55)
(A) Has Crime in Neighborhood		
Increased	22.9%	20.0%
Same/Decreased	71.1%	80.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%
$X^2 > .05$ , C=N.S.		
(B) When Do You Feel Safe in Your Home		
Always	83.6%	70.4%
Day Only/Never	16.4%	29.6%
Total	100.0%	100.0%
$X^2 > .05$ , C=N.S.		

Table 6.

Item	60-69 Years (N=61)	70 Years and Over (N=55)
(C) Feeling Safe When Home Alone During Day		
Very Safe	62.3%	63.6%
Reasonably Safe/Unsafe	37.7%	36.4%
Total	100.0%	100.0%
$X^2 > .05$ , C=N.S.		
(D) Feeling Safe When Home Alone at Night		
Very Safe	47.5%	50.0%
Reasonably Safe/Unsafe	52.5%	50.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%
$X^2 > .05$ C=N.S.		

Overall, these findings indicate that rural older persons who live alone, in the open-country, and are 70 years or older are more likely to exhibit feelings of vulnerability to crime. Since only one of the chi-square values from Tables 4-6 was statistically significant, this conclusion is made with great caution. The findings here should be interpreted as suggesting that additional research on fear of crime among the rural elderly is necessary in order to delineate its impact, and to further specify social, economic and other factors upon which this relationship is conditional.

#### Impact of Property Crime Victimization On the Rural Elderly

The final research question to be considered by this paper is the effect of property crime among the rural elderly. The results, summarized in Table 7, indicate that victimization has a strong influence. The chi-square values for each of the four attitudinal items was statistically significant.

Rural older persons who were victims of crime were far more likely to perceive crime as increasing (54.5 percent) than those who were not victims (15.3 percent). Older victims were less likely to always feel safe in their homes (59.1 percent) than non-victims (80.0 percent). Older victims

Table 7. Attitudes Toward Crime Among Rural Older Persons: Victims VS. Non-Victims

Item	Older Victims (N=22)	Older Non-Victims (N=85)
(A) Has Crime in Neighborhood		
Increased	54.5%	15.3%
Same/Decreased	45.5%	84.7%
Total	100.0%	100.0%
$\chi^2 < .01$ , C=S		
(B) When Do You Feel Safe in Your Home		
Always	59.1%	80.0%
Day Only/Never	40.9%	20.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%
$\chi^2 < .05$ , C=S		
(C) Feeling Safe When Home Alone During Day		
Very Safe	45.5%	65.9%
Reasonably Safe/Unsafe	54.5%	34.1%
Total	100.0%	100.0%
$\chi^2 < .05$ , C=S.		
(D) Feeling Safe When Home Alone At Night		
Very Safe	22.7%	52.9%
Reasonably Safe/Unsafe	77.3%	47.1%
Total	100.0%	100.0%
$\chi^2 < .05$ , C=S.		

were less likely to fee "very safe" when alone at home during the day (45.5 percent) than older non-victims (65.9 percent). Finally older victims were less likely to feel safe when home alone at night (22.7 percent than older non-victims (52.9 percent).

These findings suggest that experiencing a property crime victimization among rural older persons may substantially influence their relative feelings of security in their home. Although the sample size for this study is too small, it may be speculated that older rural victims who are

affected to the greatest degree would be those who live alone, in the open-country, and are 70 years of age and over. Future research on the rural elderly and victimization should focus on these types of issues.

#### Summary and Conclusions

This chapter has reviewed and discussed the results of a criminal victimization study conducted in Pike County, Indiana, a rural community in the southwest part of the state. The study focused upon a series of criminal offenses which may have occurred to the study sample during 1978. In brief, highlights of findings from the study included:

- (1) There were only slight differences in the proportions between older and younger households experiencing vandalism, burglary, and household larceny. The pattern of victimization on a national basis for burglary and household larceny is different. Nationally, the younger the household head, the higher is the rate of burglary and household larceny.
- (2) Older households from the small towns were more likely to experience a household-related victimization, although the difference between this group and older households from either the county seat or the open-country was not statistically significant. Single member households and older households with the head between 60-69 years of age were also more likely to experience a property crime victimization. Again, however, the differences were not statistically significant.
- (3) Older rural persons were less likely to "always" feel safe at home than younger-rural persons.
- (4) Older rural persons who lived alone were less likely to "always" feel safe at home than rural persons who did not live alone.



- (5) There were only minimal differences in attitudes toward crime between older persons residing in an open-country environment versus those who lived in a town. However, older persons from the open-country, overall, appeared to feel less safe than older persons within town.
- (6) There were only minimal difference in attitudes toward crime between older persons 60-69 years of age, and persons 70 years and older. However, rural persons 70 years and older were overall, less likely to feel less safe than rural persons 60-69.
- (7) Rural older persons who had experienced at least one property crime victimization were far less likely to feel safe than rural older non-victims.

The Pike County, Indiana represents a case study, and as such, the conclusions above must be carefully interpreted. The major implications of these findings are that victim research must seriously examine the extent and impact of victimization to rural older persons. This is particularly important for three reasons. First, non-metropolitan areas of the United States have a greater share of older persons than metropolitan areas (HEW, 1976). Second, the older rural population is increasing both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the total rural population. Third, many rural areas are experiencing a heavy influx of older immigrants (Dailey et. al., 1977).

These population trends will continue during the 1980's. The study of crime among the rural elderly will be increasingly important in providing information necessary for the design of victim assistance and crime prevention programs targeted to older persons in rural environments.

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